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ABSTRACT

New approaches to the education of older adults can be identified through a review of the literature on the following topics: developmental perspectives (including generativity and integrity) and adult development, life span habits (as determined by longitudinal research), gender roles, reminiscence, cognitive, and need-based learning. One of the conclusions to emerge from this literature is that, although the needs of the coming cohorts of older adults will in some ways replicate those of today's older learners, different and more complex uses of the educational experience may be expected. In view of their increased life expectancy, mandates to learn new technologies, continuation of employment, and health care challenges, baby boomers will require extended educational opportunities as they reach age 65. Because older adults are not only living longer but also having fewer children, they must expect to manage their own old age. Practitioners must prepare for these shifts by designing programs for older adults that stimulate, challenge, and allow for development of affective and cognitive growth. Practitioners must also bear in mind that older adults tolerate ambiguity and tend toward age-integrated learning experiences and that intergenerational programs benefit each generation involved in them. (Contains 106 references) (MN)

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TO THE EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)

New Approaches to the Education of Older Adults

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This paper discusses factors, which serve as the foundation for program development for older learners, including developmental perspectives, longitudinal research into lifespan habits, gender roles, reminiscence, cognition, and need-based learning.

Developmental Perspectives

A number of theories can be used as a framework to explore development in older adulthood. Most useful is the theory of Erik Erikson (1963, 1981, 1982, 1986 with Erikson and Kivnick), who explored the nature of psychosocial tasks that individuals accomplish at specific stages in life. For this discussion, the last two stages, generativity and integrity, are most important.

Generativity. Generativity can be observed in the many ways that older people contribute to the lives of younger persons. According to Erikson, mature individuals have a mandate to support the development of the next generation. Educational opportunities for this developmental task can be found in church settings, grandparenting organizations, tutoring, and other arenas. In a group of retired adults attending leadership training at a center in North Carolina, 78% had turned to volunteerism (Manheimer and Snodgrass, 1993). These older adults worked an average of 9.3 hours each week as public school

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tutors, in the Red Cross, and in synagogue, retirement communities, and adult day-care centers. Generativity through education and "creative retirement" (Manheimer, 1992) is a vibrant concept in the lives of many older adults. In a sample of "elderlearners," ages 55 to 96, Lamdin (1997) found that 72.9 percent volunteered within their communities. Interestingly, many older adults participate in research in cognitive and health domains (Besdine, 1997; Schaie, 1989; Schaie and Willis, 1996, Vaillant, 1997). "I feel as though I'm forging new territory," said one healthy 78-year-old of her status as a research participant.

Integrity. Erikson also observed that the life cycle is epigenetic: individuals continually rework tasks of development. Older adults often seek ways to explore earlier phases of their lives through caretaking, initiating community and family projects, and renewing identity and intimacy. Kivnick (1993) recommends creating opportunities for older adults to talk about their struggles with initiative, autonomy, and intimacy, to discuss "thematic strengths that are robust and resilient" (p. 15).

In the stage of *integrity*, elders often find significance in the learning they have achieved; they make meaning of their own experiences. This can not be done in solitude; thus it is often a time of social connection. It is important for educators to recognize that learning experiences can heighten the meaning elders find in their old age. Of this time in life, Erikson theorized:

> What is the last ritualization built into the style of old age? I think it is *philo-sophical:* for in maintaining some order and meaning in the dis-integration of body and mind, it can also advocate a durable hope in wisdom. (1982, p. 64)

In community centers, senior centers, Elderhostels, adult learning communities and other gathering places, older adults connect with others to affirm themselves. A recent exchange with a 78-year-old woman at a health center echoed what Erikson called "resolution and fortitude" (in Neugarten, 1996, p. 302):

> Researcher: "How are you?"
>
> Hilda: "I am good. If I am here, I am good."

The need to connect, to be part of a human universe, and to grow characterizes older learners. Robert Peck (1968) observed that the ability to change is paramount to psychological well being

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in older persons. "Those people who age most 'successfully' in this stage with little psychic discomfort and with no less effectiveness," he wrote,

> are those who calmly invert their previous value hierarchy, now putting the use of their "heads" above the use of their "hands," both as their standard for self-evaluation and as their chief resource for solving life problems. (p. 89)

Longitudinal Underpinnings

One particularly fruitful area of developmental research has been the use of longitudinal methodologies to follow individuals through lifelong shifts. Especially important are those of Elder (1979), Erikson, Erikson, and Kivnich (1986), Holahan (1994) who used the data from the Terman Study of the Gifted, Maas and Kuypers (1977), who used the data from the Oakland Growth Studies, and Vaillant (1990, 1993, 1995, 1997). Theory build from longitudinal studies contributes to our ability to understand individual and cohort needs which emerge within historical contexts. For example, we can follow an individual's problem-solving strategies across a long expanse rather than compare individuals in specific age groups as cross-sectional research does. Other theoretical underpinnings include role theory approaches (Gutmann, 1964, 1975, 1987; Turner and Troll, 1994) and the social construction of aging (Gubrium, 1993, Josselson and Lieblich, 1995; Ryff and Essex, 1992). The contribution of these longitudinal underpinnings to adult learning theory and practice is profound. By understanding *how* people rely on earlier patterns of behavior, we can develop environments and modes of instruction that strengthen and capitalize on their learning styles.

Gender Roles

In cross-cultural research Gutmann (1964, 1975, 1987) found that men and women developed in new ways after what is called the "parental imperative." In late middle age, Gutmann hypothesized, when the children are no longer in the home, gender stereotypes relax. Men, he states, no longer need play the role of "achiever" or "aggressor." They allow their own "feminine characteristics" to emerge and can be comfortable with nurturing and interpersonal development. Women, on the other hand, can "exert some of the masculine qualities of assertion and executive capacity they had previously had to

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repress" (Cooper & Gutmann, 1987, p. 347). When they are no longer responsible for children in the household, women are freer to engage in what Gutmann calls "active mastery," to develop characteristics which might have been considered "masculine." One woman described this shift (which Cooper and Gutmann refer to as the post-empty nest shift), saying, "There was some secret part of me that was locked away and then, at that time, was freed" (Cooper and Gutmann, 1987, p. 351).

Often adult male learners in cohorts over 60 engage in affiliative and nurturing roles (Wolf and Leahy, 1998). A mark of this phenomenon is the growing number of older men who have started late-life careers in counseling and marriage and family therapy. When they explore aesthetics, participate in discussions of family, and engage in other activities previously considered as "feminine domains," they are not losing their masculinity. Women often describe themselves as having expanded "on their basic feminine gender style to include aspects that they themselves regarded as 'masculine'" (Huyck, 1994, p. 218). Yet, there is a "balance that keeps them feeling securely feminine" (Huyck, 1994, p. 219). This phenomenon will change as future cohorts enter older adulthood: Their gender roles have not been as tradition-bound as those of today's elders have. Of this relaxation of gender stereotypes, Betty Friedan (1993a) declared, "I just say to you, look at the strengths, look at the adventure, look at the uncharted territory, as we really take on the *full* complexity of an age that can liberate us from gender masks" (p. 7).

Practical and aesthetic educational experiences often support developmental mandates: for women, courses in taxation, investments, business and travel; for men, experiences in story-telling, history, personal development and spirituality; for both, opportunities to be generative through mentoring, counseling, and pastoral outreach. Other areas that are popular for older adults are courses in grandparenting, human development, intergenerational projects, building personal narratives, computers, the humanities, and business skills (AARP, 1996; Cole, Van Tassel, and Kastenbaum, 1992; Dekker, 1993; Gibson, 1994; Greenberg, 1993; Kreitlow and Kreitlow, 1989; Lamdin, 1997; Neugarten, 1996, North Carolina Center for Creative Retirement, 1994, Shuldiner, 1992; Walker, 1996).

A highly successful quality of older adulthood is cathectic flexibility, "the capacity to shift emotional investments from one person to another and from one activity to another" (Peck, 1968, p. 89).

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As older adults continually rework developmental tasks and seek opportunities for healthy mastery of these tasks, they may engage parts of themselves that haven't been in use for many years (Kidder, 1993; Kivnick 1993; Vaillant, 1997; Vaillant and Vaillant, 1990.) Educational opportunities can maximize the potential of all participants, whether through direct intervention such as literacy or interpersonal skills, or indirect support such as vocational retraining or computer mastery (Hiemstra, 1994; Hudson, 1991; Schaie and Willis, 1996). In fact, merely deciding to undertake a new direction is often correlated with mental and physical empowerment (Chiva, 1996; Friedan, 1993b; Langer and Rodin, 1977; Long, 1993; Soloman et al, 1992; Syme, 1990). Self-directed learning abounds in the learning tasks identified (Boggs, 1992; Brockett, 1985; Brockett and Hiemstra, 1991; Manheimer, 1992, Rodin, Schooler and Schaie, 1990).

Reminiscence

Some gerontologists (Butler, 1963, 1982; Kaminsky, 1984; McMahon and Rhudick, 1967; Moody, 1984; Myerhoff, 1992) suggest that reminiscence and life review are pivotal to reaching integrity for older adults. Robert Butler (1963, 1982) developed the theory that active remembrance in older persons is a natural and universal process of "life review," an evaluation of one's past experiences. He wrote, "I conceive of the life review as a naturally occurring, universal mental process characterized by the progressive return to consciousness of experiences and conflicts; simultaneously, and normally, these revived experiences and conflicts can be surveyed and reintegrated" (1963, p. 66).

Although not all older adults may engage in the classic life review, an acceptance of reminiscence as normal and functional has changed the way educational gerontologists view recollection and reminiscence in late life and has charged us to organize activities which welcome older persons' telling their life stories (Wolf, 1985, 1992a, 1992b). Programmatic responses include memoir-writing workshops (Birren and Deutchman, 1991; Kaminsky, 1984, 1985; Moody, 1984, 1988a, among others), curricula including drama and poetry (Burnside and Haight, 1994; Giltian, 1990; Lyman and Edwards, 1989; Magee, 1988a. 1988b; Merriam, 1990, Perlstein, 1988), or experiences which invite elders to connect the past with present (Bealty and Wolf, 1996; Bornat, 1995; Gardella, 1985; Haight and Webster, 1995; Shuldiner, 1992; Wolf, 1985).

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Cognitive Theory

There are a number of specific studies which explore cognition and aging. The majority find that older adults are fully capable of learning Birren and Schaie, 1996). The central question is: How does learning occur and in what ways is it affected by aging? We wonder how much we can take in that is new and whether learning is different for older people. The following discussion explores some of the pivotal assertions of this body of research.

Basic to the theory of older adult learning is the concept of integrity and intellectual development culminating in wisdom (Dittmann-Kohli and Baltes, 1990; LaBouvie-Vief, 1990a, Simonton, 1990). Schaie, a leader in research on cognition and aging, posits that theories of intelligence must be "multidimensional" (1990, p. 292). Measures of intelligence include spatial orientation, inductive reasoning, and fluency (Schaie and Willis, 1986, 1996). In applied educational activities, "Depending upon the age group, from 60 to 85 percent of all participants remain stable or improve on specific abilities" (Schaie, 1990, p. 296). Functioning at a stable intellectual level, then, is related to one's continued involvement in cognitive activities (Berg, 1990; Light, 1990; Schaie, 1988, 1989). Schaie writes, "It's possible that healthy individuals who maintain an active intellectual life will show little or no loss of intellectual abilities even into their eighties and beyond" (1990, p. 319).

Labouvie-Vief (1990b) proposes that intelligence and memory are adaptive and that the nature and requirements of intelligence and memory change with old age, providing opportunities to develop other adaptive skills equal to the needs of life, "a kind of intelligent pragmatism" (1980, p. 7). Baltes (1993) proposes the development of "selective optimization with compensation" (p. 59) in older adults. This involves renewed "cognitive aspects of the self, self-development, and self-management" (p. 581). Indeed, many older persons have focused their learning on meeting a need for health and wellness, particularly as the Medicare system is debated and they grapple with Health Maintenance Organizations (Besdine, 1997; Lindbloom, 1993; Moody, 1988a; Wolf, 1994). Educational interventions which are specific, pragmatic, and enhance autonomy are needed throughout the later years when frailty or ill-health may occur.

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Need-based Learning

There remains no better model relating age and need than that of Abraham Maslow (1970). Individuals will seek to order their lives, to find meaning, satisfy safety and physiological needs, and achieve self-actualization in creative ways throughout the later years of life. Changing family roles, age-related losses, and social commitments impel elders to seek information. Beatty and Wolf (1996) present guidelines for connections with older adults and their families. These connections include individual, cohort, and community need-to-know patterns of personal and social transitions. This theoretical perspective promotes learning for advocacy, solving community problems, and managing finances. Much of this problem-solving education is self-directed and satisfying for older adults (Beatty and Wolf, 1996; Boggs, 1992; Brockett, 1985; Fisher, 1993; Long, 1993; Piskurich, 1993).

Self-sufficiency, the ability to remain in control of one's life, is a prime motivation for adults of all ages. Interestingly, older individuals who become deprived of this "locus of control" have been found to be especially vulnerable to illness and passive behaviors (Beatty and Wolf, 1996; Langer and Rodin, 1977; Rodin and Langer, 1977). Learning for exercise and health maintenance is essential (Deobil, 1989; Hasselkus, 1983; Peterson, Vaillant and Seligman, 1988; Rowe and Kahn, 1987). Education for continued self-sufficiency, for community living, for vocational, retirement, health, housing, and for other concerns is ongoing (Reingold and Werby, 1990). Indeed, new ways of approaching aging, known as "successful aging" in medical gerontology and "productive aging" in political gerontology are a part of understanding the changing role of the older adult (Rowe and Kahn, 1987). Education for autonomy for older cohorts will be essential as more "baby boomers" retire and enter the health care network (Lindbloom, 1993).

Moody (1988b) stresses the need for education for the "information economy": "The pivotal role of the production and distribution of knowledge constitutes the economic basis for postindustrial growth" (p. 191). With this role, Moody predicts that older adults will become more self-reliant. He adds:

> The self-help ethos includes a strong distrust of experts, skepticism about professionals, and rejection of control by outsiders. Whether in citizen activism or self-care for

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one's own body, self-help groups represent a demand for empowerment: for control over what is closest and most vital. (p. 171)

Conclusions

In an ongoing study by this author, a group of older learners were found to want information about "this brave new journey." They openly discussed the adjustments required by them and their cohorts. Although aging is still taboo in many quarters, many older adults were eagerly sharing creative and adaptive solutions to the new their challenges. Fisher (1993) delineated age-related responses in meeting developmental challenges: these remain a benchmark for our educational model in both instrumental and expressive domains.

The needs of coming cohorts of older adults will, in some ways, replicate those of today's older learners. However, we can expect different and more complex uses of the educational experience. Given increased life expectancy, mandates to learn new technologies, continuation of employment, and health care challenges, baby boomers will require extended educational opportunities as they reach age 65. This is the work of our future. Indeed, Bass, Kutza, and Torres-Gil (1990), in examining the challenges to policy dictated by the demographic shift, write:

> *The graying of the major industrial nations* is upon us, and we have just begun to grapple with its implications. In the next century, one of every four persons in the United States--that is, nearly one in every three adults--may be 65 years old or older. (xiii)

Older adults now are required to take unprecedented responsibility for their own health care decisions. Daily, we hear of an elder who, having consulted two or three specialists, is left to determine the course of his or her treatment. In 1997, twelve percent of adults are over 65 years of age. In the year 2030, this percentage will be twenty-four percent. Not only are people living longer, but also they are having fewer children. That means that older adults will need to expect to manage their own old age (Besdine, 1997).

Practitioners would do well to prepare themselves for the shifts that will emerge by designing programs that stimulate, challenge, and allow for development of affective and cognitive growth. We know that older adults tolerate ambiguity and tend toward age-integrated learning experiences. What a fruitful combination that might be for cross-pollination of minds, young and old! The real need exists for

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elders and young people to know each other: this benefits each generation. Creative environments which permit elders to be needed, to contribute to the lives of young people, would connect the two ends of the life cycle. Examples of story-telling Foster Grandparents, computer linkages, workshops in the arts inspire us. Surely there is a need to reflect on the meaning of aging within the life cycle. What remains the task of adult educators is to link our future with a network of life-giving challenges to fully support the learning needs of older people and to develop greater significance of the role of learning in old age. In our present lies our future.

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